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Montana Fish,  
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# Montana Fish & Wildlife Commission

## MINUTES

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission Video/Teleconference Meeting  
FWP Headquarters – Helena, MT

August 29, 2016

### Commission Members:

Dan Vermillion-Chairman, Matt Tourtlotte  
Richard Stuker-Vice Chairman, Gary Wolfe via video (Region 2)

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Paul Sihler, Chief of Staff and FWP Staff.

Guests: August 29, 2016 – No guests were in attendance

### Topics of Discussion:

1. Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance
2. Bighorn Sheep Tendoy Mountains (HD 315) – Final
3. Yellowstone River Closure Update - Informational
4. Public Comment — For Issues Not On This Agenda

### 1. Call to Order - Pledge of Allegiance

Chairman Vermillion called the meeting to order at 8:34 a.m. and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

### 2. Bighorn Sheep Tendoy Mountains (HD 315) – Final

John Vore, Game Management Bureau Chief, FWP is proposing a bighorn sheep hunt in the Tendoy Mountains, hunting district (HD) 315 to help eliminate approximately 12 sheep (9 ewes and 3 adult rams) from the existing diseased herd so that healthy bighorns can be reintroduced; this follows a hunt in 2015 and nine months of FWP effort to eliminate the entire herd. In 2015, the Commission accepted FWP's Decision Notice (DN) on an Environmental Assessment (EA) to depopulate the chronically low-performing Tendoy Mountains bighorn sheep herd, in which disease has become endemic resulting in too few lambs surviving to sustain the population, and restock the area with healthy bighorns. The depopulation phase of the project began in September 2015 with a public hunt. For the current hunt proposal, after sufficient media outreach, and the short timeline, the Commission will entertain the proposal, accept public comment, and make a final decision during today's meeting; public was able to comment during the call from any Regional office. FWP proposes to sell over-the-counter licenses for three days (September 6-8) so fewer hunters afield than last year, and to begin the hunt on September 15 with the traditional opening of rifle season for bighorn sheep. The media coverage would let people know about the opportunity, and the difficulty of the hunt, to set up realistic expectations. As with the 2015 hunt, FWP would send out letters to hunters purchasing licenses explaining the purpose and regulations of the hunt. During the 2015 hunt period 24 sheep were taken, which included a wounding loss and an illegal kill; following the public hunting effort, the Department thought they would be able to take any remaining sheep by helicopter gunning or hunting from the ground, so no public hunt was proposed earlier; five attempts by helicopter and over 20 days of hunting from the ground by three to four experienced hunters have only been able to take four additional sheep. FWP would like to again have a public hunt, albeit with fewer hunters than the 311 licenses sold in 2015. Not having a hunt in 2016 would mean that it will take longer to eliminate the existing diseased herd of bighorns and consequently delay reintroduction of healthy sheep.

Chairman Vermillion, Vice-Chairman Stuker, Commissioner Wolfe, Vore and Craig Fager, Region 3 Wildlife Biologist, discussed logistics of the proposal and last year's testing results

*Action: Vice-Chairman Stuker moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion that the Commission adopt Hunting District 315 (Tendoy Mountains) bighorn sheep hunt for the 2016 season as proposed by FWP.*

Chairman Vermillion asked for public comment.

*Action on Motion: Motion passed.*

### 3. Yellowstone River Closure Update – Informational

Gary Bertellotti, Acting Fisheries Manager, explained on August 19, 2016 FWP requested and received Commission approval to close over 100 miles of the Yellowstone River and the associated tributaries to all public uses from the northern border of Yellowstone National Park (YNP) at Gardiner Montana to the Highway 212 Bridge Laurel Montana. This closure was predicated on a significant whitefish die-off in the river from a microscopic parasite *Tetracapsula bryosalmonae* (PKX) which causes Proliferative Kidney Disease; this parasite has been implicated in severe fish kills in other water and has the potential to infect and cause mortality in other species including trout. Due to low flows, increased water temperatures and additive stress from angling and recreation uses throughout the main Yellowstone River and tributaries had potential to increase the mortality and spread the parasite to tributaries and river systems FWP through its Commission made the determination the temporary closure was necessary. The public was notified as the process and consideration for the closure was being discussed, the public was reporting the observance of large numbers of dead fish, FWP is responding to public inquires and a public meeting was held in Livingston on August 24, 2016 attended by over 300 citizens. Public comment will not be solicited. Due to the many unknown factors of this disease and the severe mortality event on whitefish several alternatives were assessed. The final action/alternative was determined to be the most effective to avoid the spread of the disease and protect the valuable fisheries resources in the Yellowstone River and its Tributaries. The Commission made an emergency decision for full closure. This is in effect for a maximum of 120 days or less, as determined by evidence, that an opening of all or part of the closure poses no threat to the fisheries resources. The Department will determine what the Department's next action will be once the test results are received September 1.

Vice-Chairman Stuker, Bertellotti and Eileen Ryce, Hatchery Bureau Chief discussed closure logistics, disinfectant procedures/efforts and future actions.

Chairman Vermillion stated this closure is having a severe economic impact on the surrounding counties; a lot of pressure is building.

Commissioners asked to have conference call update when new information is available; preferably before Labor Day weekend; prefer sometime Thursday, September 1.

Sam Sheppard, Region 3 Supervisor, stated survey floats will be conducted over the next two days; will have discussions of what is next after the surveys are complete.

### 4. Public Comment ~ For Issues Not On This Agenda

*Action: Vice-Chairman Stuker moved and Commissioner Wolfe seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting. Motion Passed.*

*The meeting adjourned at 8:55 a.m.*

  
Dan Vermillion, Chairman  
M. Jeff Hagener, Director